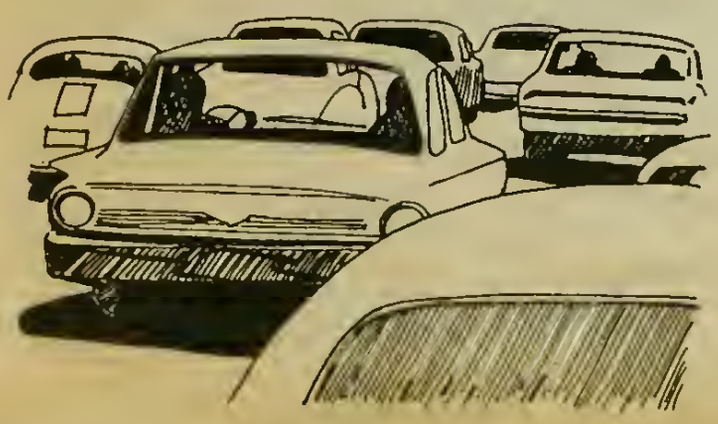
TRAFFIC IN NEIGHBORHOODS

Prepared by the Department of City Planning to assist neighborhood planning programs

The traffic problem in neighborhoods

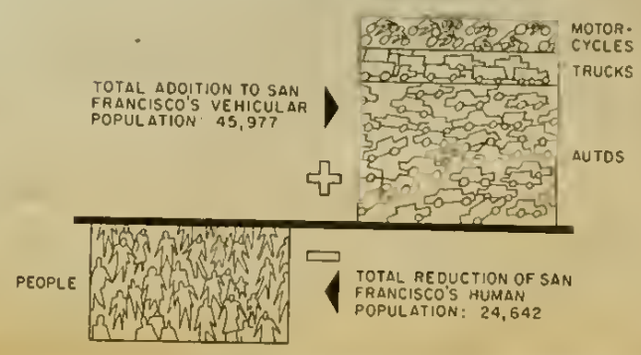


In neighborhoods throughout San Francisco there is a concern about traffic. The concern takes many forms. In some areas it is the occasional speeding car using what should be a safe residential street that causes the problem. Other areas suffer in varying degrees from an excessive volume of traffic on local streets.

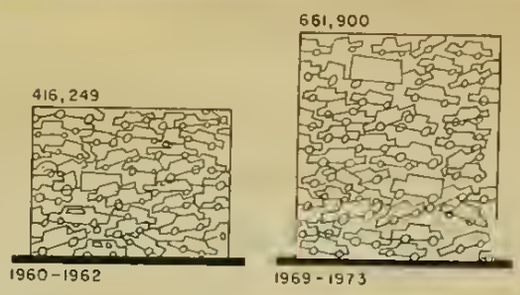
Long-time residents can remember when there was very little traffic on residential streets. They remember when walking was a quiet pleasure, when you could back your car out of the garage safely and get a good night's sleep in the front bedroom. In some areas of the city, this has changed. No subtle research is required to determine the cause of this change. A comparison of photographs taken 20 and 30 years ago and similar views today will suffice. In the past, there were few cars parked along the curb and few moving down the street. Today's view typically features continual rows of cars parked along curbs and a steady procession down the street.

The cars come from two sources: (1) increasing car ownership by city residents; and (2) in certain areas, increasing volume of auto commuters from Marin, the East Bay and the Peninsula. Those who live in the path of major traffic corridors bear the burden of both in-town and out-of-town commuters traveling to the downtown.

CHANGES IN PEOPLE AND AUTO POPULATION 1960 TO 1970



TRAFFIC INTO AND OUT OF THE CITY EVERY 24 HOURS



Many of our major arterial streets are congested with traffic. The result is often that cars overflow onto adjacent parallel streets as some drivers seek and follow shortcuts through residential neighborhoods. The invasion of neighborhoods by the commuting car driver is destructive of a good neighborhood environment.

Fulton Street near Divisadero in 1936 ····· The same place 38 years later in 1974

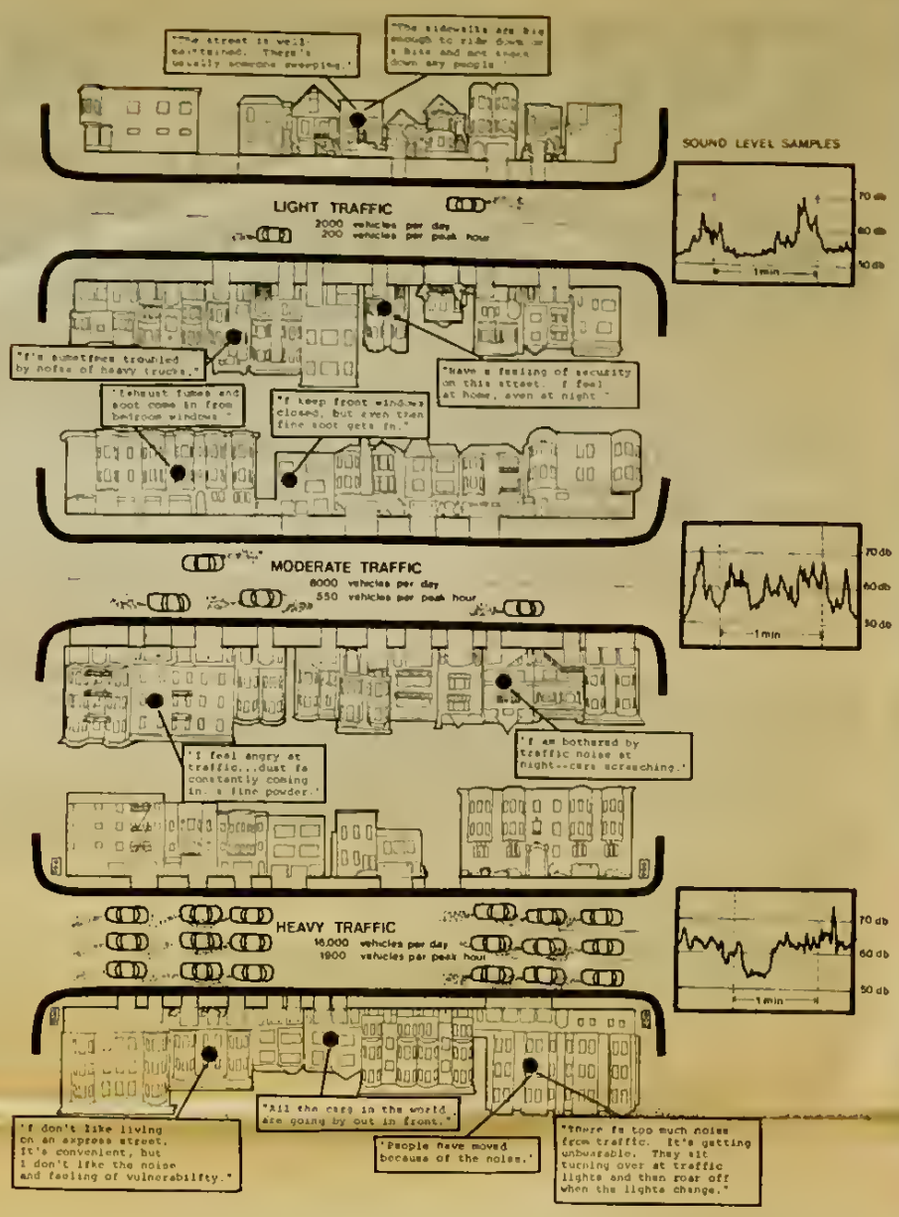
The impact of traffic

Where high traffic volumes occur on residential streets, people's lives may be affected. People are aware of the visible problems of noise, dirt and increased danger.

The inconvenience caused people on the busiest streets can be observed almost any day: the driver waiting to get out of the garage or trying to park, the danger involved in washing a parked car.

Besides the obvious problems, there are other costs to residents. Research shows that people living along streets with heavy traffic have fewer friends and acquaintances on the block. They tend not to know their neighbors or take an interest in the street. The street tends to become less livable. In contrast, residents on blocks with little traffic are more likely to view the street as belonging to them. They know their neighbors and take pride in their street. Their pride often takes a visible form such as trees, flowers, and fresh paint.

Irregular traffic noise on a relatively quiet street can be an intrusion. Occasional noisy speeding cars or motorcycles can be very irritating and even dangerous, particularly where children are playing.



THE COMMENTS CONCERNING NOISE, STRESS AND POLLUTION IN THE BOXES WERE MADE BY RESIDENTS LIVING ALONG THE THREE STREETS DEPICTED. THE INTERVIEWS WERE MADE AS PART OF THE STREET LIVABILITY STUDY, A SURVEY OF HOW RESIDENTS VIEW THEIR STREETS.

Existing protected areas

Not all streets or areas have suffered from growing automobile population. Even in the midst of the most congested part of the city there are neighborhoods enjoying safe, quiet streets.

Some areas are protected from through traffic by steep hills combined with winding roadways or discontinuous streets. Examples of naturally protected areas may be found on many of San Francisco's hills, including Russian Hill, Dolores Heights and Twin Peaks. Residential areas along the edges of McLaren Park, the Presidio, and a few similar areas enjoy more freedom from traffic because of the open space barrier. The street pattern in subdivisions such as St. Mary's Park, Park Merced and Ingleside Terrace discourage unnecessary traffic.

STREET PATTERN IN INGLESIDE TERRACE

CHESTNUT ST. FROM POLK ST.

How neighborhoods can be protected

The same principles that now protect a few areas from excessive traffic can sometimes be applied to other neighborhoods and streets. The ways of doing this are simple: make it difficult to go through a neighborhood so that most drivers will choose to go around. When traffic has no alternative except to go through the neighborhood, it can be slowed to safer, quieter speeds. Some neighborhood traffic problems and how they may be corrected are shown on the centerfold. The City has a program--called the Protected Residential Area Program--through which the various solutions shown in the centerfold are used to solve neighborhood traffic problems.

Protected Residential Area projects occur because neighborhoods want them. The initiative usually comes from residents. Ideally, responsibility for the project might rest with a single committee comprised of residents from various parts of the area.

There are no magic numbers for determining what is or is not a traffic problem to residents. The size of the area may be determined or limited by the boundaries of a neighborhood organization, the scope and nature of the problem, the availability of funds, or simply what a committee thinks it can handle and the community will accept. Small areas can be considered if residents wish it.

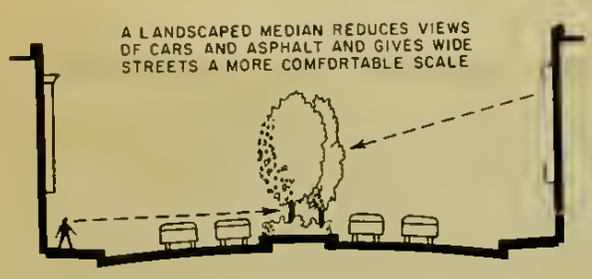
A good plan accomplishes the most for the neighborhood with minimum inconvenience to residents and with minimum required funding. If the neighborhood finds it wants something more restrictive, offering more protection, then it must be prepared to negotiate with all parties and develop strong resident support. The neighborhood needs to consider that positions held by concerned City departments are based upon long years of practical experience. The requirements for local and emergency access and efficient transit movement, for example, can be modified only so much by a plan without seriously impeding these essential services.

Planning for protected residential areas

In applying corrective devices it must be remembered that the more restrictive the area is made for outside traffic the more restrictive it also becomes for residents. If made too restrictive, residents may object unless the benefits are more valued than the inconvenience. Where the proposed changes would result in severe congestion on surrounding streets, objections from concerned City departments as well as affected citizens are to be expected. Thus, though the methods used are simple, there may be complications.

How easily traffic shifts to major arterials is critical to the success of any plan requiring traffic diversion. If the problem merely moves to another local residential street, little is gained. Where an adjacent arterial or collector street can handle the added traffic, there is no problem. But where streets are already heavily loaded, the amount to be diverted must be carefully considered. A judgment may have to be made between some added volume on an arterial and a neighborhood's traffic situation. A possible compromise might be a reduction or slowing down of through traffic instead of total elimination.

There are some situations where it may be impossible to reduce traffic on residential streets. Many of San Francisco's essential arterial streets are lined by residences; the traffic cannot easily be made to disappear, and there are usually no alternatives other than diverting traffic to adjacent residential streets.



On streets where traffic cannot be reduced, the visual and environmental impact of heavy traffic can be minimized by landscaping. The amount of landscape buffering depends upon the amount of space and funds that can be provided for that purpose.

Keeping neighbors informed

Generally, the greater the change in traffic patterns sought, the greater the amount of work required of the neighborhood organization sponsoring the plan. Much more time is needed to introduce the ideas and gain public understanding.

The people who live in San Francisco's historically protected areas are used to the inconveniences involved and accept them as part of their environment. Others who have lived with unrestricted traffic all their lives may resist changes to their established patterns of access and egress. Older residents who have lived a long time in one place often have the most difficulty accepting and adjusting to new traffic patterns.

Those residents involved in the development of a Protected Residential Area plan have usually gone through a long process. They have considered many alternatives, examined traffic data, made field surveys and so forth. They have had time to consider each idea and become used to it and to become comfortable with the plan. Other residents of the neighborhood, who have not had this opportunity, may resist somewhat when first confronted with a completed plan. This can be avoided if concerned residents are kept advised throughout the planning process.

The larger the planning area, the more effective becomes the planning solution, but communicating with residents becomes more difficult. Within a single block much can be accomplished by word of mouth; people know each other and will pass the word around. As the area increases in size, the percentage of residents that can be reached this way decreases drastically. Neighborhood meetings help, but unless there is strong feeling on the subject, the turnout may represent only a small fraction of the local population.

Direct mailing is one of the most effective ways to reach residents and property owners. Where the area is large and/or the plan is complex, several mailings may be necessary. This offers the chance to introduce the proposed actions in more digestible lumps of information. A first newsletter, for example, might outline the nature of the problem and the objectives of the plan. A second newsletter might then go on to present the specific plan for achieving the objectives and eliminating the problem. At each step it is a good idea to solicit the residents' comments and opinions. A questionnaire is a helpful device for soliciting response. The gradual unfolding of the plan with the opportunity for participation and feedback at each stage of its development can avoid unnecessary friction within the community.

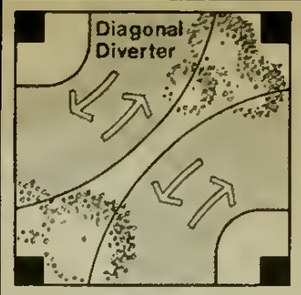
Incorporated nonprofit organizations can mail at the rate of $17 per 1000 letters. If an organization has willing members, hand delivery can save postage costs. The Neighborhood Service Center of SPUR (phone 387-0123) offers assistance in handling special mailings.

The importance of contacting as many residents as possible cannot be overemphasized. When the first public hearing is held, official notices will be sent to every resident within the area and drawings may be sent to those owners who might be directly affected by improvements in front of their property. If a sizable group of people claim they were never contacted, and if the sponsors of the project cannot demonstrate they made reasonable efforts to inform the neighborhood, approval may be denied.

TRAFFIC PROBLEMS

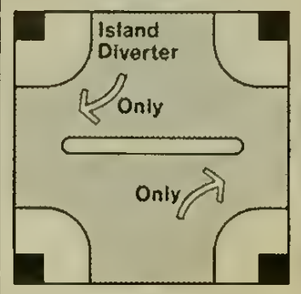
Some ways to solve them

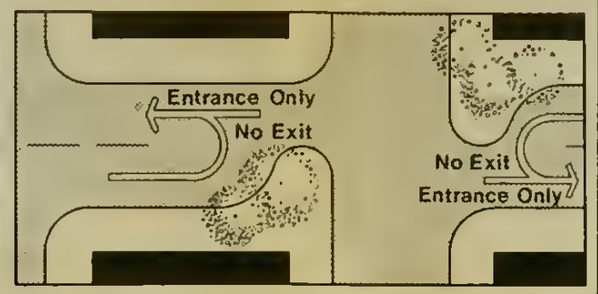
Solutions vary with the problem. The street pattern, land uses and width of pavement all affect what can and cannot be done. Here are some possible solutions that may work in your neighborhood.



Through traffic?

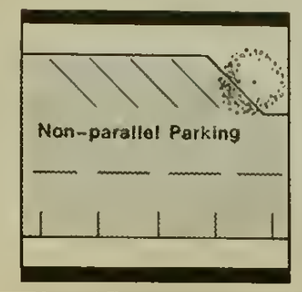
Diagonal and island diverters at intersections turn traffic from a straight path. One-way entrance or exits to two-way streets permit only one-way movement for through traffic but keep two-way travel for block residents and emergency vehicles. Devices like these make it less convenient to use local streets as short-cuts without unduly hindering access by residents.

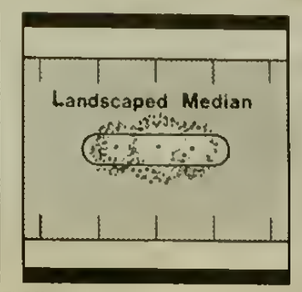


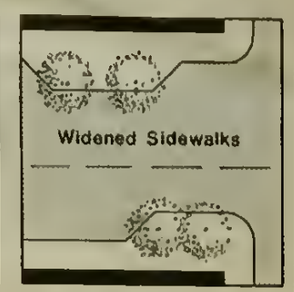


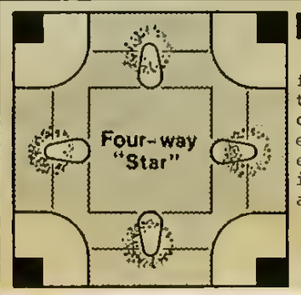
Very wide streets?

People often drive faster on wide straight streets than on narrow curving ones. To make drivers more cautious, have traffic lanes seem narrower, reduce the total number of lanes, or make the street appear gently winding. Diagonal and perpendicular parking, widened sidewalks and medians with landscaping can do this. If a wide street must carry traffic through a neighborhood, extensive landscaping reduces the impact.







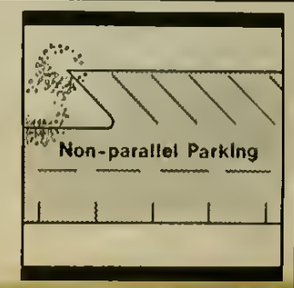


Pedestrians crossing?

At dangerous intersections features which reduce the distance between sidewalks makes crossing the street safer and easier for children and the elderly. Better lighting and improved crosswalk visibility also helps.

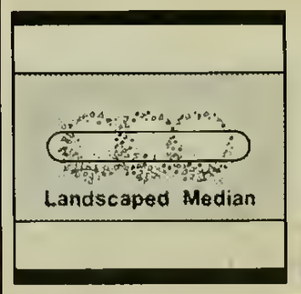
Not enough parking?

Normal parallel parking occupies 22 feet of curb. Diagonal or perpendicular parking needs about half that and can increase the number of spaces on a block. Widened sidewalks between parking areas can provide space for greenery and give visual relief from the increased number of parked cars. The frequency of driveways should be considered in the choice of any parking arrangement. Non-parallel parking along transit traffic routes is not desirable because of its effect on Muni service and safety.



Not enough greenery?

Many of our city's streets are lined with attractive homes. Yet the streets themselves are often barren areas of cars and pavement. Trees soften expanses of steel and concrete, clean the air, look attractive and help make a noise and visual buffer against moving traffic. Places for trees, shrubs and grass can be found in excess street space, sidewalk areas and in the design elements featured here.

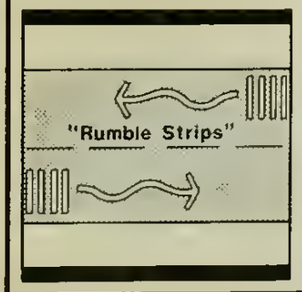


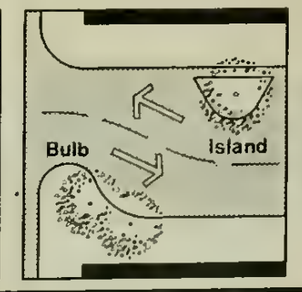
Four-way stops

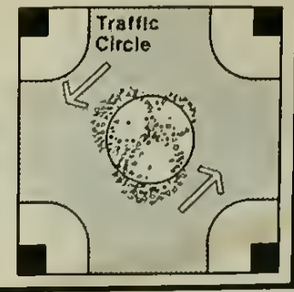
Four-way stops are popular but not always the best solution to traffic problems. They are put at corners with accidents or where visibility to see cross traffic is poor. Placed continuously, as along Lake Street in the Richmond, traffic has decreased. But four-way stops have faults. They have increased accidents as drivers develop a false sense of security, especially at night at low volume isolated intersections when it is tempting to coast through without making a full stop. Incorrectly applied, they can be more dangerous than no traffic control at all.

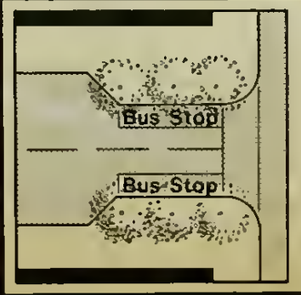
Speeding traffic?

On streets where traffic is light, unexpected speeders are dangerous. Pedestrians, especially the elderly and children used to slower traffic, can be taken by surprise. Corner bulbs, islands and traffic circles can remind drivers that the street is not a speedway and remove the "straight shot" down the street. Gravel "rumble strips" on the road surface make a rumbling sound when driven over and alert drivers to traffic conditions. Corner bulbs, sidewalk widenings at the intersection, may require moving existing storm drains which adds to construction cost. Curb islands are bulbs separated from the curb. These save on expensive storm drains but can only be used in areas of the city where litter is minimal. Traffic circles prevent straight runs through the intersection. All can be landscaped to make a block seem more residential in nature.







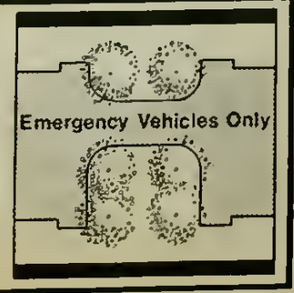


Barren bus stops?

The sidewalk may be widened at the bus stop to make a more comfortable waiting area and provide a place for benches and shelter. When the sidewalk is extended out to the moving traffic lane, the bus does not pull over into the parking lane to load and unload. By stopping in the moving lane, the bus does limit the street's traffic carrying capacity. This may or may not be a desirable feature depending on the street in question. Widened sidewalks at mid-block, for example, next to a school, make more visible places for school buses to stop.

Children playing?

The typical street is a dangerous playspace for children; playgrounds are safer. In neighborhoods far from playgrounds, it might be possible to close off parts of certain streets as small play areas. Traffic would be limited to emergency vehicles.



Neighborhood spirit

Perhaps the most important factor affecting the success of any effort to obtain Protected Residential Area treatment is the vitality, persistence and resourcefulness of the neighborhood organization. As those who have helped organize local improvement projects or other civic efforts know, it demands a lot of time and hard work. Many meetings must be attended, letters written and people consulted. San Francisco is fortunate that it has so many hardworking neighborhood organizations. Over the years they have made significant contributions toward making the city a better place in which to live and work.

Where to get help

The neighborhood organization should contact and work jointly with the Department of City Planning and the Department of Public Works.

The Department of City Planning provides planning and graphic assistance and can assist in the schematic design of the appearance of street improvements, an important factor in the acceptance by residents. Project appeal increases when other desired community amenities are realized at the same time.

The Department of Public Works is involved during all phases including detailed design and construction. Within that Department the following divisions and sections may participate: Traffic Engineering, Electrical, Mechanical and Sanitary Engineering, Park Engineering, Street Cleaning and Tree Planting, Streets and Highways, and Surveys and Mapping.

Usually a residents' committee works with a Traffic Engineering representative who involves other departmental sections as required. Traffic Engineering provides traffic counts, analysis of movement patterns and can develop plans for correcting identified problems. In preparing its plan the committee may also meet with the Fire and Police Departments and Municipal Railway.

To contact these departments, the committee or community group should write a letter to the following:

▶ S. Myron Tatarian
Director of Public Works
260 City Hall
San Francisco, CA 94102

▶ Allan B. Jacobs
Director of Planning
100 Larkin Street
San Francisco, CA 94102

The official process

When the neighborhood committee arrives at a plan it feels the community will accept, it should be reviewed by the various concerned City departments to see if there are special problems prior to public presentation. Departmental reviews may take place through the Interdepartmental Staff Committee on Traffic and Transportation (ISCOTT), with staff representatives from Fire, Police, Public Works, City Planning, Municipal Railway, and the Redevelopment Agency, which provides an efficient one-stop review forum. Once a plan clears ISCOTT the committee can solicit public support with the assurance that it is workable.

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Next in the official process is the Director's Hearing, held by the Director of Public Works. This hearing determines if any residents of the area feel adversely affected by the plan. On Protected Residential Area projects notices are usually delivered to all occupants. It is important that the committee completes its public information program and resolves individual problems (if possible) before the hearing is scheduled. Petitions and letters of support are helpful but the best evidence is a good turnout of citizens at the hearing.

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Before further City action can occur, the Department of Public Works must translate the plan into official maps and legislation describing changes in the curb line, parking arrangement and stop signs.

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Changes in sidewalk width and street configuration then go before the City Planning Commission to see if the proposed plan conforms with the City's Master Plan. Both the Urban Design and Transportation elements of the Master Plan support the creation of Protected Residential Areas and identify primary and secondary thoroughfares to carry the city's heavy traffic.

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The plan is then heard by the Streets and Transportation Committee of the Board of Supervisors.

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Turning restrictions, stop signs, parking and traffic controls are reviewed by the Fire, Safety and Police Committee of the Board of Supervisors.

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If the funds for the project are already budgeted, the plans would also be reviewed by the Finance Committee of the Board of Supervisors to ascertain that the project is well thought out and is a good investment of public funds.

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After the required committee review is completed, the project goes to the full Board of Supervisors for final action.

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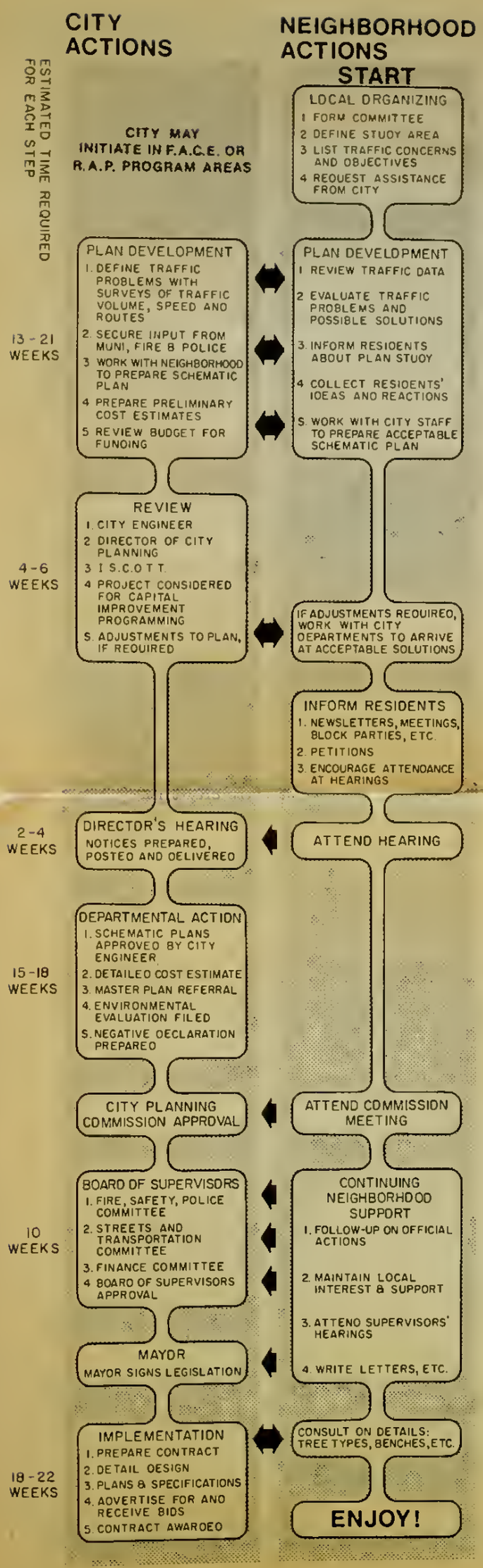
It is not required but it is advisable that neighborhood representatives attend every hearing. Essentially, it is their project and they have the right to present the plan in its most favorable light. A well prepared presentation outlining community objectives and support of the plan will help assure a successful conclusion.



Getting the project financed

A public project such as Protected Residential Areas must have the necessary official approvals and be funded. There are many competing demands for City dollars; many seekers of public money are well organized and are remarkably persistent. When expressing support, remember these key time periods:

1. The City departments assemble their proposed Capital Improvement Program for the following fiscal year during August and September to be submitted to the City Planning Commission for review by October.

2. The proposed Capital Improvement Program is included in the Department's operating budget, and goes to the Office of the Mayor around November.

3. The Mayor sends the revised Capital Improvement Budget to the Board of Supervisors by January.

It is easier to obtain funding if the project is well defined, has evidence of public support and has a specific price tag. This means a neighborhood organization may have to invest time and effort without certainty the project will be funded.

An annual budget for the Protected Residential Area program would help reduce the uncertainty. Neighborhoods could then plan knowing their project would be in line for development.

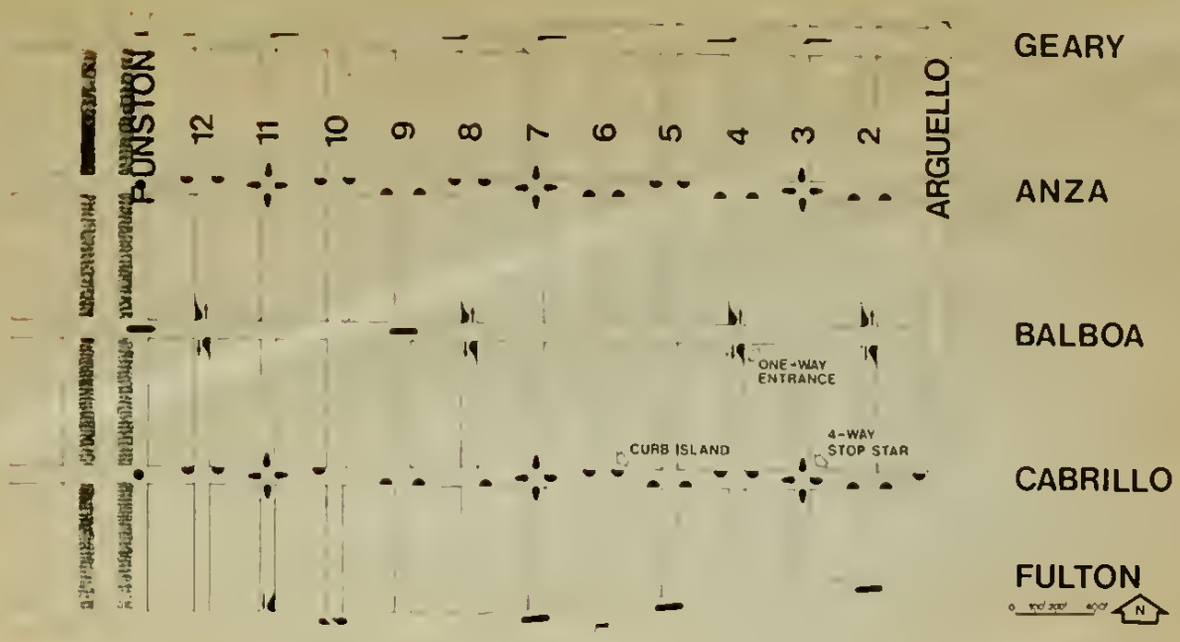
A first step was taken in the 1973-74 fiscal year budget when $300,000 from Revenue Sharing funds were set aside for Protected Residential Areas. With this money a project initiated a year earlier by a neighborhood was funded and another neighborhood began a successful effort. Although no constant funding source yet exists, $200,000 is budgeted from gas tax for the 1974-75 fiscal year. It would be meaningful to have an annual appropriation sufficient to fund three or four projects each year.

When requests for Protected Residential Area projects exceed current funding, priorities for future development will be assigned. The priorities would be based upon a number of factors, including: 1) the severity of environmental problems in the area as well as extent of traffic; 2) the extent of neighborhood support; 3) the cost of the project compared to benefits obtained; 4) the completeness of the plan; 5) the availability of collector streets to carry diverted traffic; and 6) the length of time the neighborhood has waited for its project to be funded.

Trees

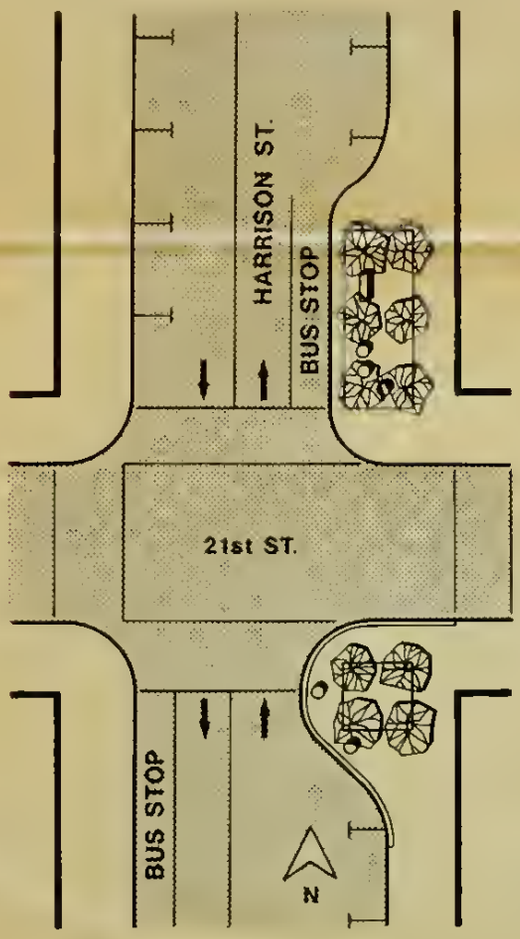
Trees play an important role in making Protected Residential Area devices an attractive addition to the neighborhood. However, the City's ability to maintain more trees is limited. When a neighborhood wants trees, the approach may be similar to the regular tree planting program for trees planted in front of houses: property owners will be asked to sign a maintenance agreement with the City to maintain the tree. No one would be forced to maintain a tree if they didn't want one.

Without an increase in the tree maintenance staff, trees planted in intersections, in the street area (not in sidewalk), or unusual concentrations such as at bus stops, may have to be maintained by a special assessment district encompassing the project area. Typical costs would range from one to two dollars a year per property owner.



Planned for the Inner Richmond

This ambitious plan to discourage heavy, fast and through traffic from 48 blocks of the Inner Richmond took two years to develop by the Planning Association for the Richmond and the City of San Francisco. Traffic control devices used are landscaped curb "islands" to help slow down traffic, four-way stop "stars" for safer intersections and one-way entrances to two-way streets to discourage unwanted traffic from using local avenues as short cuts. Cost will be $150,000 from Federal Revenue Sharing Funds. Construction should begin early in 1975.

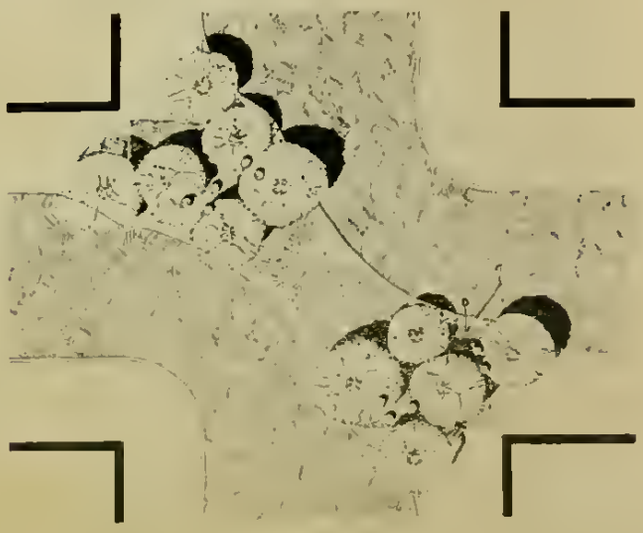


Planned for the Inner Mission

This plan cuts the traffic carrying capacity from four lanes to two on parts of Bryant and Harrison Streets to discourage heavy through traffic. Widened sidewalks at bus stops and corners will have attractive paving and trees. Cost is $100,000 from Revenue Sharing Funds. Construction to begin Spring, 1975.

What improvements can look like

Recent improvements on Sanchez Street under the Federally Assisted Code Enforcement Program (FACE) showing widened sidewalks with tree plantings, bollards, attractive paving and more parking spaces for the residents.



Possible treatment

Diagonal diverters like this provide useful open space and discourage through traffic. Similar devices have been used in Oakland for over 10 years.